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HOMEMAKERS' CHAT

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(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "FLOOR FINISHES." Information from the Forest Service, United States Department of Agriculture. Bulletin available, Circular 489.

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The bare--or almost bare--floors of summer-time give us homemakers a fine opportunity to do something about the worn spots and the rooms where the floors need refinishing, waxing, oiling, varnishing, or some other treatment to make them attractive and to preserve the wood.

It happens that I have recently received a publication from the Forest Service, United States Department of Agriculture that should prove helpful in tackling this job. It is entitled, "Wood Floors for Dwellings: Their Selection, Installation, Finish, and Maintenance." Apparently maintenance is just what my own floors haven't had, and maybe yours, also; for one reason and another the poor floors have not received their monthly ration of wax and they certainly show it. But maintenance depends on the kind of floor--that is, the wood of which it is made, and the finish. Dr. F.L. Browne of the United States Forest Service's Forest Products Laboratory at Madison, Wisconsin, wrote the chapter in the bulletin on floor finishes. Let me quote him:

"Our pioneer forefathers used thick hewn sections of log, smoothed as far as possible on one face with an adz, and laid edge to edge, to make their 'punchead' floors. Later, during colonial days, when sawed lumber became available, planking of random widths fastened down with wooden pins constituted the material employed for floors. It was not until nearly the middle of the 19th century that the planing mill made its appearance, and the first product made on it was flooring..... It is a matter of interest that when the first planing mill was set up in Philadelphia, all the workmen who had been employed in manufacturing flooring by hand congregated around the plant and threatened to burn it down for fear the new machine would throw them out of work."

Dr. Browne continues: "Years ago floors were commonly finished with repeated applications of hot linseed oil, each application buffed by hand, and when the surface was saturated with oil, it was waxed and maintained by waxing at suitable intervals....A good many applications were necessary, and the process was rather laborious. The finish was durable, did not show scratches, and was readily patched at places where it was worn, without refinishing the entire floor. Later, floor oils were often adulterated and gave poor results, so that this method was replaced by varnish, shellac, or combinations of these, with wax finish. Nowadays we have specially designed products known as floor seals, which are more like the old oil finish, but not so laborious to put on."

These floor seals are quite new, and a little further on in the bulletin Dr. Browne says they may be regarded as thin varnishes or bodied oils made to penetrate less deeply into the wood than unbodied drying oils. The work can therefore be done with fewer applications. Anyone trying floor seals for the first time should follow directions very carefully, says Dr. Browne.

Again quoting:

"No one type of finish can be said to be superior in all respects and none will long continue to give good service unless it is suitably maintained. The secret of good floors lies in thorough understanding of the nature and limitations of the particular kind of finish chosen and careful following of the appropriate maintenance program."

I'm afraid Dr. Browne doesn't think much of the easy-going housewife who wants practically self-maintaining floors. He says,

"Where the owner's chief requirement is a maximum interval of time between refinishing jobs, during which the floors will be merely kept clean by sweeping and dry mopping; or where the highly lustrous appearance obtainable only by using a substantial coating of resinous material is desired, coatings of varnish or shellac are likely to prove most satisfactory....Dissatisfaction with such finishes arises most often where recoating has been too long postponed, and this is particularly likely to occur because those who choose such programs do so largely to escape the burden of watching their floors carefully."

Well, Dr. Browne, I know that I for one am only a weak woman, but I have to confess I do a good deal of postponing before I move all the living-room furniture out to the sun porch and do the floor over. The family has to live through these major refinishing jobs, and nobody likes them much.

"Shellac is used so widely for floors chiefly because it dries so rapidly," the bulletin explains. "A floor may be refinished with shellac and put back into service within 24 hours. Painters and landlords are inclined to favor shellac finishes; the owner-occupant is likely to prefer varnish. Where floors can be kept out of service long enough to apply varnish finishes properly - and this takes several days- varnish will prove to have better resistance to water that may be spilled on it, also to be tougher and less easily scratched than shellac.

"The durability of coatings can be improved by keeping them waxed, renewing the wax every 4 to 6 months according to the amount of wear on the floor. Well-waxed floors are easily kept clean by dry-mopping. The coating of wax on a shellac or varnish finish should be kept very thin or the floor may be slippery. It might be well to consider the newer floor seal finishes with or without wax if infrequent attention is given to renewing the wax finish.

"Waxing of floors is done to best advantage with paste floor wax and an electric polishing machine designed for the purpose. Polishing by hand is far too laborious. For those who wish to get along without a polishing machine and are willing to accept a somewhat less attractive and less durable wax finish, there are water emulsion floor waxes that are merely mopped on the floor and allowed to dry.

"Finally," says Dr. Browne, "wood floors with fine finishes should never be scrubbed with water or unnecessarily brought in contact with it. Sweeping or dry-mopping should be all that is necessary for routine cleaning. A soft cotton mop kept barely dampened with a mixture of 3 parts of kerosene and one part of paraffin oil is excellent for dry mopping. When the mop becomes dirty, it should be washed in hot soap and water, dried, and again dampened with the mixture of kerosene and paraffin oil. Exceptional patches of dirt that cannot be removed in this way may be taken off by rubbing lightly with fine steel wool moistened with turpentine."

And that, friends, is a point which many of you have been wanting to know about. What mixture to use on the dry mop, and how to get dark spots off. It's all in the bulletin, which may now be obtained by writing to the Forest Service, U. S. Department of Agriculture.

